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ABSTRACT

A self-paced introductory French course sequence offered at Francis Marion College (South Carolina) was begun in response to nontraditional students' difficult study schedules and varied language backgrounds and knowledge levels. This program of individualized instruction has objectives identical to that of standard French instruction at the same level, and students can alternate between courses taught by the two methods. However, procedures differ significantly. In the self-paced course, class attendance is mandatory, but students work with text and syllabus at their own pace. The syllabus is organized by course days, not class meetings, and students take exams when they feel they are ready. The oral language component is satisfied through teacher example, regular language laboratory or home audiotape use, and three laboratory examinations. Conversation sections are used to reinforce language learned in the laboratory, address problems in text material, and contribute to group dynamics among self-paced students. Increased flexibility is the principal advantage of the method, and promotion of self-reliance and initiative is also a valued result. For the instructor the main difficulty is in the paperwork generated with the method, primarily in the number of tests and test versions required. Self-pacing has increased French enrollment. (MSE)

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OBJECTIVES AND PROCEDURES IN SELF-PACED FRENCH

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OBJECTIVES AND PROCEDURES IN SELF-PACED FRENCH

Abstract: Self-paced or individualized foreign language programs have been a part of post-secondary education in the United States since the 1970's. Although showing a decline since the peak of their popularity in the 1970's, individualized foreign language programs are still used by almost a hundred colleges and universities, according to a survey by Harlow in 1987. The present article describes the successful experience with self-paced French at one institution for the past dozen years in the belief that this information may be of benefit to other foreign language departments, at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.

OBJECTIVES AND PROCEDURES IN SELF-PACED FRENCH

In the spring semester of 1980 Francis Marion College began an experiment in offering French 101 in the self-paced method. Our reasons for deciding to try the self-paced method were mainly two. First, most of our students at the time were commuters who held part-time or full-time jobs in addition to attending college. These students had less time for home study than students who reside on campus. Secondly, we wanted to provide a method of studying French for students with various levels of prior study of the language so as to avoid mixing of these students in one classroom of elementary French. Our purpose was to offer both these groups of students a useful and practical method of studying French that would allow them to do the majority of their work in the foreign language classroom under the supervision of an instructor. Self-paced represents our effort to fit foreign language study into the needs and the schedules of our students.

Readers may already be aware of self-paced foreign language study. Known also as individualized instruction, this method of foreign language study became popular in the 1970's and enjoyed its greatest popularity from that time on into the early and mid-1980's. Individualized instruction is still successfully used by a number of colleges and universities. Linda L. Harlow reports in her article, "Individualized Instruction in Foreign Languages at the

College Level: A Survey of Programs in the United States" (Modern Language Journal, vol. 71, number 4, Winter 1987, pp. 388-394) that at least 111 foreign language departments representing ninety-seven colleges and universities throughout the nation were continuing to offer language instruction in the individualized track. Another 194 departments in the survey expressed an interest in developing individualized instruction programs. Although 108 foreign language departments had discontinued individualized instruction, citing reasons such as low enrollment, students not learning on their own, too expensive, etc., Harlow points out that the continued interest in individualized instruction seems to indicate that the method is "neither a dead issue nor a bandwagon fad whose time has come and gone." Many respondents to Harlow's survey believe that such programs are likely to maintain a place beside traditional classroom instruction. Based upon responses to her survey Harlow concludes that "one might regard the future of individualized foreign language programs in higher education with guarded optimism."

The purpose of this article is to describe the objectives and procedures of the self-paced program as practiced at this institution for the last twelve years in the belief that such a program, or some aspect thereof, might prove of use to other foreign language departments, on either the secondary or post-secondary level.

The principal objectives of our self-paced courses are essentially the same as the objectives of our standard courses, that is, to provide a two year, four semester program of French studies that prepares the student in the fundamentals of French syntax, with practice in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Since standard French courses are also offered each semester, a student has the choice of either self-paced or standard French. The student may in fact alternate between the two, taking self-paced one semester, for exampl , then switching to the standard method the following semester.

Self-paced offers an alternative to the standard classroom setting. Students can study the first two years of French on their own with assistance from instructors who are available in the classroom to assist them.

While the objectives of self-paced and standard courses are basically identical, the procedures of the two methods differ significantly. Since everyone is familiar with a standard foreign language classroom, let me devote a few sentences to describe what goes on in a self-paced classroom. From the one section of French 101 self-paced begun in 1980 the self-paced program has grown to three sections, each of which contains two elementary and two intermediate courses. These courses meet on the usual class schedule of three hours per week. A typical self-paced section, for example, meets at ten-thirty on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. At this hour, approximately seventy

students in the four courses of French 101 through 202 assemble and begin work under the supervision of two instructors who are on hand in the classroom. An orientation the first day of the semester apprises the student of the procedures to be followed and the expectations that he is to fulfill. Following this orientation each student obtains a text and receives a syllabus pertaining to the course in which he is enrolled. The student works his way through his text in accordance with his syllabus. When he encounters difficulty one of the instructors in the classroom discusses the problem with the student on a one-on-one basis. Class attendance is mandatory with a limited number of unexcused absences being allowed. There are six exams in each course, exclusive of laboratory exams which are discussed below. An exam is scheduled into the syllabus after every four lessons. In self-paced a student takes an exam when he feels that he has mastered the material in these four lessons rather than at the discretion of the instructor. The penalty for failing an exam is to re-study the material and to take a make-up at a later class period. Because of the make-up policy on failed exams it is of course necessary to have a number of variant exams covering the same material.

The syllabus for a self-paced course is divided into forty-two DAYS, each DAY representing the lesson that is to be completed on the corresponding day of the semester. Courses that meet three times a week have approximately

forty-three classes during the semester. Each time the class meets that day is posted on the blackboard. The student thus can check his progress in the course he is taking by noting the day of the semester on the board and comparing it to the DAY he is on in his syllabus. He may work as slowly or as rapidly through the material as his abilities and other obligations allow. He may finish his course ahead of time and start in on the following course, or if he has been slow, he may not finish a course during the semester he started it. For this student a grade of CO (carrying over) is available provided that he has satisfactorily completed at least half of the six exams in the course. A CO grade obligates the student to finish the course during the following semester. The only way a student can fail a self-paced course is to do fewer than half the exams in that course or not complete a CO grade the following semester.

I would now like to say a few words about the oral proficiency component in a self-paced course. The nature of self-paced means that there is little use of the spoken language within the classroom. The instructor may provide examples of correct pronunciation when conferring one-on-one with a student and may answer other questions concerning pronunciation, but the major portion of the oral proficiency component is carried out in the language laboratory. In the two courses of French 101SP and French 102SP there are thirteen laboratory lessons scheduled into the course

syllabus. On the designated DAYS the student reports to the language laboratory and through the means of audio tapes and corresponding written material in his text he is introduced to the basics of spoken French. The laboratory work starts with a guide to the pronunciation of French sounds. The French 101SP laboratory lessons then begin with such elemental phrases as "oui" and "non", "comment allez-vous?", etc. Throughout the thirteen lessons in the two courses combined approximately 250 everyday French phrases, questions and responses, are presented. The Media Center of the College duplicates the audio tapes in the thirteen lesson sequence at no cost to the student. The student thus has a tape to play at home or in his car by which to study the laboratory material. Such a tape is also useful to prepare for future travel abroad.

There are three laboratory exams in each of the first year courses. The laboratory work comprises one-seventh of the final grade in each course.

Ideally, classroom space and staff permitting, conversation sections of thirty minutes a week grouping seven to ten students who are at approximately the same point in their studies should be held. These sections should be directed by an instructor or by an advanced student, and can also be used to reinforce conversational phrases learned in the laboratory, to address problems that have arisen about text material, and to give a sense of

group dynamics to those participating in the self-paced program.

From the foregoing discussion it should be clear that the several features of the self-paced method that appeal to students may, for the most part, be summed up in the word flexibility. Students work through the material in a given course at a pace which suits their personal learning techniques and which offers only minimal interference with other school work or outside employment. An instructor is available in the classroom for a one-on-one consultation when problems related to the study of French arise. A more adept student or one with significant prior study of French is not required to sit through an entire course which is oriented toward less experienced or less proficient students of the language. Nor can the presence of the more experienced student in the same classroom arouse feelings of inadequacy among beginning students. The superior student may in fact complete a self-paced course ahead of schedule and begin work on the succeeding course. There are occasionally students who complete two self-paced courses in one semester.

The self-paced method is ideal for the student who has previously studied French and who needs a review of the sort that he can accomplish working mainly on his own with an instructor available to provide assistance over troublesome areas. The method also works well for the growing number of

mature students wanting to study foreign languages by a means that suits their needs and interests.

The flexibility of being allowed to take exams when he feels prepared rather than at the discretion of the instructor is an aspect of self-paced that is particularly appealing to a student. After having asked for an exam on a particular class day, for example, a student may, for personal reasons or because of other unforeseen circumstances, not be ready to take the exam. There is no problem even at the last moment for the student to postpone taking the exam until a later time. Another attractive feature for the student taking a self-paced course is the obligation to re-take a failed exam and the option to re-take an exam on which he made a grade of 'D'.

The atmosphere of the self-paced classroom is business-like, yet relaxed so that the student is reasonably at ease. Self-paced is learner oriented, not teacher oriented. In such a method the materials the student works with and the task he is expected to accomplish must be clear to him. He must also feel confident in his ability to perform that task. Confusion leads to frustration, a detrimental factor in a course where students are responsible for providing much of their own motivation. The accessibility of the instructor to the student is equally important.

In addition to the flexibility offered by self-paced French, we believe that the program also helps to promote self reliance and initiative among students. A premise of

self-paced is that the learner, not the instructor, is at the center of the learning process. The teacher's role in the self-paced classroom is primarily as a facilitator. The major responsibility for absorbing the material of a self-paced course falls to the learner. We believe that this is where it should be.

Most of the students in a self-paced course seem to enjoy the change of pace from the standard classroom. The brighter student may like working on his own. Able to assimilate material more rapidly than would be required of him in a standard course, the motivated student often accomplishes more than a single course during the semester. Slower students likewise benefit from self-paced. Allowed to pace themselves so as to assimilate material at a speed which is suitable to them, they do not fear failing as a result of being less proficient or less experienced in French than their classmates.

The preceding paragraphs should suffice as an explanation of the merits of self-paced language study as we have experienced them at this college over the past dozen years. No system of foreign language instruction is without fault, however, and to ignore the several disadvantages of self-paced to both the instructor and the student would be to give an unbalanced account.

For the instructor the major problem with self-paced is likely the paperwork generated by the method. In French 101SP alone, for example, the student takes six exams. Each

of these exams, we feel, must have four variants for security purposes and for purposes of re-testing. Multiply these numbers times four courses, exclusive of laboratory material, and the build-up of testing material becomes obvious. Exams must also be graded. Each of thirty-five students in French 101SP can be expected to take six exams plus three lab exams during the course. The self-paced instructor must be willing and able to keep pace with this workload.

At the end of each semester we ask students to fill out an evaluation form concerning their experience in self-paced French. We receive a number of suggestions and opinions from these evaluations. About two out of three students filling out the evaluations like self-paced. These students cite "flexibility" and "freedom to work on my own" as their principal reasons for preferring the method. A self-paced course, however, is not for everybody. Unfavorable reactions to self-paced among students over the years may generally be summed up in two areas. First, a freshman or sophomore does not always possess the self discipline necessary to perform satisfactorily in a self-paced course. Students are usually open about stating their tendency to procrastinate and their feeling that they would be better off in the structured setting of a standard course. Secondly, there are some students who feel that their ability in spoken French develops more expeditiously with a live instructor who uses the foreign language in the

classroom rather than by the use of audio tapes in the language laboratory. For both these classes of students and for others who for any reason may feel uncomfortable in a self-paced setting we recommend the standard courses which are conducted concurrently each semester along with self-paced.

It should be noted that self-paced tends to increase enrollment. In a discipline that suffers periodically with problems of declining enrollment, this tendency can be an important consideration. Learning a foreign language usually requires years of study before appreciable results in terms of fluency are achieved. Well worth the effort though these results may be, we must compare our discipline with others, business, the social sciences, for example, even English, where tangible results are attainable in less time than in a foreign language. In light of such a comparison, the study of a foreign language, lacking the pragmatism of other disciplines, may be less attractive to some students. At this institution, for example, many more students take the Bachelor of Science degree than the Bachelor of Arts degree simply because the Bachelor of Arts degree requires successful completion of four semesters of a foreign language. What this means in an academic setting where the study of a foreign language is not required is that we are in competition for enrollment with other departments whose offerings may be more palatable than ours. Any steps that we may reasonably take, therefore, to attract

students to the study of a foreign language, to help them to a pleasant and positive experience while studying the language, is a legitimate endeavor on our part. Self-paced foreign language study assists in achieving this goal.

Our experience over the past dozen years supports the general conclusion by Harlow that individualized instruction in foreign language study has a place in the curriculum. Self-paced should not supplant the standard courses in foreign languages, but used as an alternative to and in conjunction with those courses self-paced provides a useful method of foreign language study for many students.